

FACT SHEET ON YOUTH: EDUCATION

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HIGHLIGHTS

- School attendance at the Primary level – Grades one to six – is compulsory in Jamaica.
- In 1999, the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT) was introduced to replace the Common Entrance Examination. This examination determines children's placement in secondary school.
- Overall, GSAT scores have improved in nearly all subjects since 1999.
- Many students are still performing below grade level. Boys, children from poor families, and those from rural areas are the ones who generally face the greatest challenges.
- In 2002, data showed that as many as 10% of public sector teachers in both primary and secondary schools had only a secondary-level education.²
- Enrolments at the primary level stand at 97%, at the secondary level it is 88%, but only 5% at Grade 11 & 12, and 15% at the tertiary education level.²
- School attendance, attrition, and literacy remain major areas of concern in the educational system.
- Despite the challenges, Jamaica continues to show a strong commitment to improving educational opportunities for youth and recently earmarked 10% of the national budget for education.¹⁰

Formal Education in Jamaica

School attendance is one of the most important aspects of growing up in Jamaica. At age six, children are eligible for primary school, which covers grades one to six and is compulsory for all students.¹

Students in the lower grades may be enrolled in one of three different types of public schools: primary schools, all-age schools, and the primary sections of joint primary and junior high schools.¹ Private primary schools are also available and are usually referred to as preparatory schools. All-age, primary, and junior high schools incorporate grades one through nine. In 2000/01, the total enrolment in all primary grades was 312,371¹ approximately 97% of the relevant age group.²

Placement Tests

The Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT) determines placement in secondary school and in the secondary levels of all-age and joint primary and junior high schools. GSAT assesses students' competence in mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies.⁴

Since the introduction of the GSAT in 1999 to replace the Common Entrance Examination, average test scores have improved across the country. For example, scores for math and science increased from 48% and 53% out of 100 in 1999/00 to 52% and 55% respectively in 2000/01.⁵ Concerns remain, however, over the large number of students performing below their grade levels.³ In response to this, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Culture has instituted testing in grades one, three and four to evaluate performance early and identify students who need help.

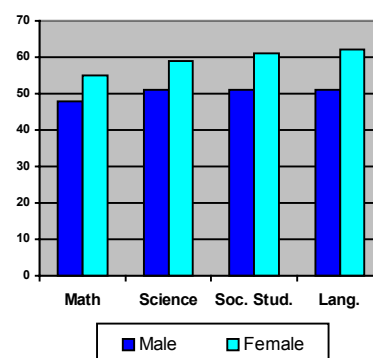
Other Improvement Efforts

The Ministry of Education, Youth, and Culture, which is responsible for public education, has initiated a number of programmes to improve the educational system and to continuously assess student progress. One of these programmes is aimed at upgrading teachers' qualifications.³ Data from 2002 indicates that as many as 10% of the teachers employed in the public sector have completed only a secondary-level education.²

Secondary Schools

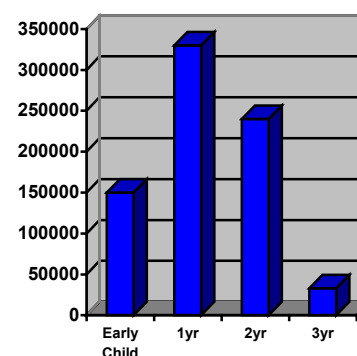
While compulsory education ends at grade six, the vast majority of students attend school beyond the primary level. In 2002, close to 88% of those in the relevant age group were enrolled in secondary school.²

GSAT Mean Scores by
Subject & Sex



Source: Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2002

Enrolment by Level
2000/01



Source: Ministry of Health, 2001

There are several options for secondary education: junior high schools, joint primary and junior high schools, all-age schools, secondary high schools, technical high schools, and vocational high schools.¹

Secondary education is divided into two cycles; the first includes grades seven through nine and the second, grades 10-13. In 2000/01, total public school enrolment in the first cycle was 144,143 and in the second cycle was 83,242.¹ Most young people, however, end their secondary education after grade 10 or 11; and by grades 12 and 13, the net enrolment rate drops to only 5%.²

Tertiary Education

Following secondary school, an increasing number of youth are pursuing tertiary education, which includes teacher training, professional degree programmes, and public and private training institutions. In 2002, more than 33,360 students were enrolled at the tertiary level, representing close to 15% of the relevant age group. Females accounted for the majority (67%) of enrollees.²

Attendance and Other Issues

School attendance is a concern in both primary and secondary programmes. In 2000/01, for example, the national average attendance for primary school was 82.9%.⁴

For families with few financial resources, school attendance is often irregular. Although the government has made primary education free and implemented financial assistance programmes for lunches and textbooks, many parents keep children at home for financial reasons. Recent data estimates that 43.2% of households kept their children out of school for some period of time due to financial constraints.^{4,6}

Poor children from rural areas and boys in particular, are affected by weaknesses in the educational

system. More than half (54%) of schools ranked in the top 25% nationwide, in terms of quality and performance, are located in the Kingston Metropolitan Area (KMA).⁷ Composite GSAT scores for 1999-2001 reflect the disparity between rural and urban schools, with average scores in English proficiency ranging from a high of 61% for the KMA to a low of 51.7% for rural areas. The average scores for other urban areas ranked in the middle at 54.6%.⁷

For most boys, performance in school falls below that of girls, and they are more likely than girls to terminate their schooling earlier.⁸ Recent GSAT scores also point to a gender imbalance in levels of school achievement. In 2001, the mean national score for math was 48 for boys compared to 55 for girls and for language, was 51 for boys and 62 for girls.⁹

Literacy is another important issue in this sector. Studies have found that many students, especially boys, cannot read or read sufficiently well to advance when they enter secondary school. By the end of the primary cycle, about 30% of grade six students remain functionally literate.¹⁰ A report on secondary school reform in Jamaica points to the severe disadvantage faced by such students across virtually all subjects in their level of achievement. Students who enter secondary school unable to read adequately tend to fall further behind in the school system and often leave before completing their education.¹⁰

Commitment to Education

Despite the challenges, the government has shown its commitment to providing quality education programmes for all youth. No other country in the region, with a population over one million, spends more than Jamaica on education as a percentage of total government expenditure or of its Gross Domestic Product.¹⁰

In 2000/01, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Culture received the second highest budget allocation, amounting to \$19.1 billion or 10% of the government's total budget. Average per capita spending was \$18,560 for primary students and \$26,711 for secondary school students, increases of more than 12% from 1999/01.¹⁰

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Fact Sheet on Youth in Jamaica: Education



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